

Sail on: Mark 4:35-41; 2 Corinthians 6:1-13

by [William R. O'Brien](#) in the [June 14, 2003](#) issue

Evening came at last. All day Jesus had taught the large crowds, using parables as bridges to minds and hearts. His pulpit was a boat, providing a way to connect with the throngs without getting crushed. But as darkness was about to overtake the light, he told the disciples he wanted to go to the other side of the lake. "Leaving the crowd behind, they took him along, just as he was, in the boat."

Just as he was. Is there anything more draining than constantly giving oneself intellectually, emotionally, physically and spiritually to a demanding public, day in and day out? To the stern of the boat he went, just as he was, and fell into a deep sleep.

It must have been the mother of all squalls. Some of the disciples were seasoned fishermen, skilled in the art of navigating dangerous waters. But this was a red alert. They were going to perish—and the one person who might turn the situation around was sleeping peacefully in the boat's place of honor, the stern. They woke Jesus up with a strident "Don't you care, Teacher?" But he did not respond to their lack of faith. Instead he responded to the peace within himself, and produced a calm that impacted nature as well as the frightened disciples. The disciples were amazed. "Who is this? Even the winds and waves obey him."

A couple of decades later the apostle Paul had many experiences that threatened his life. Where was Jesus when Paul needed him? He was shipwrecked and spent a night and a day in the open sea. Five times Jews applied 39 lashes to his back. He was beaten with a rod, stoned and spent many nights in jail cells, sleepless and hungry.

Wake up, Master. Don't you care? Was the miraculous rescue from the forces of nature limited to the days when Jesus was present on earth? Is God really sovereign over the cosmos, including the earth and all its elements? If so, why doesn't God stop wars? Why do children suffer from cancer? Why does hostility invade homes and splinter relationships? Why do boundaries of exclusiveness divide us over race, color and creed?

Paul's life was determined not by boundaries, but by the center. He placed the One who was the center of his life in the honored place—the stern of the heart. Paul knew that the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, neither slumbers nor sleeps. It was not delivery from life's dangers that defined a miracle: it was the coping power, the power present in any life situation, that bore witness to the mighty power and presence of God.

To the Corinthian Christ-followers Paul showed himself to be a servant of God: in troubles, hardships and distresses; in beatings, imprisonment and riots. In patience and kindness he remained genuine, yet was regarded as an imposter. He knew how to rejoice though sorrowful; how to be poor yet make many rich; how to have nothing yet possess everything. From the heart Paul learned the true meaning of freedom, and he modeled it.

Through many dangers, toils and snares he had already come. So Paul could say to followers of the way in Ephesus, "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

The experience the disciples had with Jesus on the Sea of Galilee preceded the cross, the resurrection and Pentecost. No wonder they asked themselves who this man was, this man who could rebuke the wind. The wonder of the miracle took precedence over the man.

But Paul could say he wanted to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings. That is why, in spite of the pain of prior experiences, he could forget what was behind and strain toward what was ahead. Paul's centered life pressed toward the goal to win the prize for which God called him heavenward in Christ Jesus.

A few years ago my wife and I faced what was our "mother of all squalls" experience. Without warning, a brain attack took away use of the right side of her body.

My initial response was, "God, we are drowning—don't you care?"

Early one morning I read Psalm 84. In that psalm of ascent two of the verses jumped off the page: "Blessed are those whose strength is in you, who have set their hearts

on pilgrimage. As they pass through the Valley of Baca, they make it a place of springs." A peace began to settle in even before we would know what the outcome was to be. The miracle of God's presence, accompanied by the power to live in any situation, was all we needed. I took a pen in hand and wrote:

How blessed are those whose hearts are set on
pilgrimage
Who wait upon the Lord in a dry land.
The shepherd hears their cry and gently opens
Springs of living water right where they stand.
Now with a new song they lift up their voices,
To their great God a hymn of praise is due.
The Christ of Calvary's victory stands before them
And bids them follow through his grave to life anew.

When Christ is invited into the stern of the heart, the miracle of presence and power equip us for any eventuality.